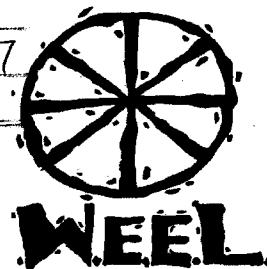


To: House Appropriations
From: WEEL – Olivia Riutta – oriutta@weelempowers.org, 406.495.0497.
Date: March 5, 2007
Re: House Bill 808 – Biennial funding for DPHHS

EXHIBIT 35
DATE 3-5-07
HB 808



Mr. Chairman and members of the committee.

First, I want to sincerely thank you for this opportunity to speak. I am here today as a representative of WEEL. We are a state based non-profit organization that is made up of low-income Montana families. We are non-partisan, we do not support or endorse candidates; our interest in this budget bill lies in the fact that we want the best outcome for Montanans living in poverty or just barely getting by.

We are pleased to see that there is funding for an expansion of the CHIP program to cover more kids. Currently in Montana there are 37,000 uninsured children. We are unique in that our uninsured rates among our kids have actually increased while the rest of the country has held steady. Over 90% of the uninsured kids come from families where at least one parent works – this is a program that supports working Montanans.

We need to set our goals for the CHIP program at 200% of the Federal Poverty Level. We all heard the commitment from Senator Baucus to make CHIP his number one priority. He is working hard in DC so that we can cover more kids in Montana. Our matching rate is now 1:4. We need to expand eligibility so that we are sitting on our hands until the next legislative session wishing that we could get our maximum match.

WEEL would like to see funding for the earned income disregard under TANF. The Department proposed a benefit increase of \$27 a month for a family of three. This would still be far less than benefit levels in 2002. A greater earned income disregard would allow working families to keep a little bit more each month, incentivizing work, and helping the Department maintain compliance rates.

We would also like to see all the recommendations of the Appropriations Subcommittee, integrated into this bill. The Subcommittee sat through days of testimony from not just lobbyists, but real Montanans who have the most experience with the implications of your policy decisions. They were very thoughtful in creating bi-partisan recommendations. WEEL is made up of low-income families and our members are confused as to how to provide meaningful testimony on a bill that seems to have been drafted in secrecy and doesn't allow sufficient time for testimony.

I do thank you for the little time that we have been afforded. I hope that you can support the issues I have outlined. Please acknowledge the efforts of the Appropriations Subcommittee as well as your constituents, who took time off of work, drove to Helena, and told you their stories so that as a legislator you can made the best policy decisions.

Thank you again,

Olivia Riutta